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Four simple words

Dear Editors,

I read with interest Apelian et al.'s recently published article entitled "Is the dental profession ready for person centred care?"¹. Their qualitative study of eleven dentists practicing in Quebec Province, Canada found that most of the sample, regardless of their years in practice (3-21 years service) expressed difficulty with eliciting patient stories, as well as a lack of interest in or an uncomfortableness with the rich narrative data being shared with them. The 'messy' lives of their patients were framed as an 'inconvenience' for dentists who merely wanted to fix their teeth.

These findings confirm the worst about dental education, the persistence of the biomedical approach and the prioritizing of technical proficiencies and clinical competencies at the expense of advocating for a model of oral health that is socially determined and where oral care is interactional, dialogical and holistic. While the authors acknowledge the shortcomings of this model and its negative legacy on patient-dentist relationships and the profession, they throw the gauntlet to dental education to rectify this predicament.

Social and behavioural scientists, like myself, working in dental education feel both the responsibility of such a task as well as the impossibility of it. From our interactions with students to timetable schedulers and curriculum designers we encounter individual and institutional resistance in the guise of a 'hidden curriculum' about the behavioural and social sciences as applied to dentistry.² Here in the UK, the GDC acknowledges the role played by the behavioural and social sciences in the undergraduate curriculum.³ Nevertheless, we are still waiting for the trickle-down effect to take hold and transform dental education at an institutional level.

In answer of both these dilemmas, "how can dentists be more patient centred?" and "how can dental education to be more holistic?" - I offer the same four words- "What matters to you?". When asked of patients, research confirms that this open question facilitates a dialogue between patient and dentist where mutual respect and understanding about the needs, preferences, expectations and values of each party can emerge and grow.⁴ When asked of dental educators and dental schools, the question "What matters to you?" forces us to contemplate what is dental education for? Whom does it serve? Where is the patient in all our deliberations? Clarifying our curricular priorities in such a way can help us begin the process of paradigm shift and curricular transformation.

Yours sincerely,

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